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Railroads Triumphant: the Growth, Rejection, and Rebirth of a Vital American Force

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ing in the West differed from other sections or why the West was able to exercise a disproportionate influence on national banking policy. In this regard, a concise conclusion would have helped to tie together the themes of the study. Nevertheless, this is clearly an able effort and one that will be of great benefit to western historians.

Railroads Triumphant: The Growth, Rejection, and Rebirth of a Vital American Force, by Albro Martin. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. xiv, 428 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. $29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JAMES A. WARD, UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, CHATTANOOGA

Railroads Triumphant is distinctively Albro Martin's book; no one else could have written it. He has spent thirty years studying railroad history, and in a densely packed 398 pages of text he has distilled what he has learned and mixed it with his personal views on economic development. To readers of his acclaimed *Enterprise Denied*, which assaulted the conventional wisdom by asserting that Progressive regulation of railroads destroyed one of the nation's most precious economic assets, this book ought to come as no surprise. Martin has expanded his earlier work, arguing that had railway leaders been allowed the freedom to exercise their spirit of enterprise, the United States would be a lot better off today.

Martin's is a great looping work, starting with the first spadeful of earth turned on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in 1828 and running through double-stacked container trains in the 1990s serving "just in time" industries mimicking the Japanese. Concentrating on eastern railroad history, he develops his work chronologically and topically and often doubles back over ground he has already covered, but like Colorado's famed Georgetown Loop, he does it always at ever higher levels. He favors bigness, combinations, and corporate power, which he claims gave the United States lower transportation rates that called forth more production. He professes admiration for railroad executives, their bankers who promoted mergers, and groups such as the Iowa Pool that apportioned traffic and set rates. As with most exacting historians, however, Martin chooses his heroes carefully; he prefers the likes of James J. Hill, about whom he has written a compelling biography, William Vanderbilt, Frederick Kimball, J. Edgar Thomson, and Albert Fink. He is strangely quiet about Jay Gould, the Erie gang, Thomas A. Scott, and Collis P. Huntington. Martin pounds the folks he dislikes unmercifully. Politicians, Congress, regulatory bodies—especially the Interstate Commerce Commission—Progressive reformers of the Robert LaFollette ilk, "revisionist" historians such as

Robert Fogel and Albert Fishlow who have argued that railways were not indispensable, and especially Gabriel Kolko, who contended in *Triumph of Conservatism* that large corporations invited regulation to end excess competition and to help them achieve monopolization.

Railroads to Martin were responsible for a walloping industrial and agricultural expansion. They broke down regionalism that had long hindered growth, and they replaced small-town merchants, wholesalers, and drummers with larger, more efficient businesses that used the railroads to ship their merchandise swiftly and cheaply all over the country. Moreover, the railroads themselves employed hundreds of thousands of men at relatively high wages, creating purchasing power that called forth more economic activity.

Martin's chapters on coal and agriculture are especially good. Coal, he notes, seems always to be located in the most inaccessible places such as western Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Railways built into the hilly coal regions hauled millions of tons of the black diamonds out of nowhere to eastern cities where they were sold at affordable prices. The mineral revolutionized the way ironmakers smelted and mongered their iron and later steel, two of the foundations of America's might. Less glamorous roads, such as the Lehigh Valley, the Norfolk & Western, and the Reading proved every bit as important as the more flashy New York Central and Pennsylvania railroads.

In the Midwest, Martin claims railways created large-scale, commercial farming. The region between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers has always been seen as a railroad fault line, and Martin implicitly accepts that idea. The so-called granger roads there—the Chicago & North Western, Soo, Rock Island, Milwaukee, and Chicago, Burlington & Quincy—linked eastern trunk lines with transcontinentals and carried grain and livestock to markets. They also concentrated agricultural processing businesses at transportation hubs such as Chicago, Minneapolis, and Buffalo. The granger roads, however, failed to heed Jim Hill's advice to push farther west to command a portion of the nation's through traffic. Nevertheless, they were large and powerful enough to alienate farmers, America's only true radicals, who struck back with granger laws through which they tried to control interstate trade by state legislative fiat. They succeeded for almost ten years before the Interstate Commerce Act was passed in 1887. Martin, as might be expected, has little truck with such political activities.

The author chronicles the modifications to the Interstate Commerce Act that gave the commission power to establish minimum and maximum rates on railroads even while governments subsidized automobiles, trucks, barges, and air transport. The railroad's physical

plants wore down and their return on assets became the lowest of any industry. The catharsis came in 1970 with the Penn Central bankruptcy, the largest in the nation's history. Lest the whole transport system collapse, Congress created Conrail and in 1980 passed the Staggers Act, which freed the rail industry. With deregulation, Martin points out, has come the railways' rebirth. Their future, he cautiously avers, looks bright indeed.

Railroads Triumphant is a fun book, written in the patented Albro Martin style. Always provocative, funny by turns, learned, full of puns, nursery rhyme allusions, and just plain Martinisms, he takes what could have been the driest of topics and makes it appear fundamental to our very existence. On the other hand, he often overstates his case. Railroaders were not always disinterested servants of the public. Often their policies did hurt people economically. They did corrupt legislatures in states such as Pennsylvania and California and often bribed and schemed their way to prominence. But Martin's book provides a needed historical corrective to the sometimes prevailing view that huge corporations and railroads were always bad. *Railroads Triumphant* is a must read.

The Popular Mood of America, 1860–1890, by Lewis O. Saum. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. 284 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. $37.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY RICHARD S. TAYLOR, ILLINOIS HISTORIC PRESERVATION AGENCY

This book is a sequel to Saum's *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America* (1980). The two volumes together describe a subtle but profound change in outlook among "humble but literate white Protestant Christians" (3) belonging to America's "rural mainstream" (15) based on the author's extensive reading of their "letters, diaries, and commonplace jottings" (2). Simply put, Saum argues that average Americans living in the post–Civil War era "allowed their attention to be claimed far more by the things of this world" (12) than had their pious predecessors.

Saum's devout pre–Civil War Americans bear little resemblance to the optimistic entrepreneurs that usually populate our antebellum histories. He depicts them instead as somber, intensely pious, and other-worldly people largely resigned to their fates in a world ordered by God's providence and far less concerned with politics or progress than with death and prayer. All that changed, he insists, with the Civil War and the rush west. The chaotic randomness of those events fos-